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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000728

SIPDIS

CPA BAGHDAD FOR DIR OPO RON SCHLICHER

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SUBJECT: IRAQI SUNNIS VISIT AMMAN, SEEK TO ENGAGE U.S. IN IRAQ

REF: CPA HQ 05130261830Z JAN 04

Classified By: CDA David M. Hale for reasons 1.5 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

11. (S) A group of Sunni Iraqis representing the Iraqi Peace Party told PolCouns January 22 that they want to cooperate with the CPA and Coalition Forces in Iraq, but are put off by tough security measures there. The group said that anti-U.S. violence in the Sunni triangle does not represent support for Saddam Hussein, but the fear of average Sunnis that their interests are not being taken into consideration. It is also, they argued, the result of high unemployment among working age Sunnis who previously had held government and military jobs. The group made an unexplained plea for good treatment and resettlement in the U.S. of MEK members in Iraq. While we cannot vouch for their bona fides, the members of group seemed genuine in their desire for direct contact with CPA. END SUMMARY

SEARCHING FOR A SYMPATHETIC EAR

12. (C) PolCouns met January 21 and 22 with a group of Iraqi Sunnis representing the Iraqi Peace Party (Hizb as-Salam). The party's Secretary General and group leader, Sheikh Saleh Abu Khumrah, explained that the group had decided to travel to Amman to talk to USG representatives because they believe they could not get a fair hearing from Americans in Iraq, particularly because they do not want to undergo the "demeaning" security procedures required to visit Coalition officials.

SUNNIS POORLY REPRESENTED ON IGC

13. (C) Abu Khumrah asserted that anti-coalition violence in the Sunni triangle is not due to residual support for Saddam Hussein: the vast majority of Sunnis realize that the era of Saddam and the Baath party are over forever. Rather, the violence is a reaction of the Sunni population to Iraq's humiliating military defeat, continuing harsh Coalition security practices (including arrests and raids on homes), and the strong feeling that Sunnis are not properly represented on the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC). The Sunnis on the IGC, he said, have no constituency within the Sunni triangle, and do not speak for most Iraqi Sunnis. This gives Iraqi Sunnis the feeling that, in the wake of a military defeat, the U.S. is imposing a political leadership on them. The group urged the CPA to consult more closely with them and other organized Sunni groups in the run-up to the June 30 handover of power to ensure that Sunnis feel better represented in the new transitional Iraqi government. Abu Khumrah also asked for monetary assistance for his party, which he promised would work to further Sunni relations with the Coalition. He also suggested that he and other Sunni tribal and political leaders should travel to the United States (at U.S. expense) to start building bridges, and to be able to explain the U.S. to their constituents.

SECURITY PRACTICES MAKING ENEMIES

14. (C) All in the group complained that Coalition security practices were strengthening ill-will toward the U.S. among Sunnis. U.S. soldiers, they asserted, do not respect Iraqis or their traditions, saying that an American soldier should not be permitted to search an Iraqi police chief -- it causes the police chief to lose face, the respect of his community, and therefore, effectiveness. They also complained that lack of local knowledge caused many indiscriminate arrests. One sheikh cited an example from Kirkuk where one son of a family had attacked Coalition forces, but Coalition forces -- unable to convince the family to identify and turn over the guilty individual -- had arrested all five of the family's sons. If the Coalition had worked with local tribal leaders, the sheikh asserted, they could have worked out surrender of the

guilty son, saving the others from arrest. As it is, all sons remain in prison, and the U.S. forces have won the scorn of an entire clan. There are currently "more than 30,000 Sunnis" in Coalition custody, the group claimed, and each one has "a family that will react against the U.S." because of the arrest of its family member; "these arrests breed only hatred." PolCouns outlined the Coalition's new conditional release program for some detainees and asked the group to check with local Coalition officials about the program when they returned to Iraq.

15. (C) Several of the members also said that, while they desire dialogue with the U.S. and Coalition, they expect dialogue to lead to concrete changes in Coalition practices. Several members of the group said that they had spoken with local U.S. military commanders, but their complaints and suggestions had not been translated into any change in practice on the ground. Abu Khumrah said that he understands that Coalition forces come under attack daily, but argued that Coalition security practices increase resentment and will make stability in the Sunni triangle harder to achieve.

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UNEMPLOYMENT, LACK OF SERVICES GROWING PROBLEMS
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16. (C) Abu Khumrah stressed that another issue that is growing in importance is unemployment. Many Sunnis from prominent families who previously worked for the government or military were now unemployed. (Two of those present identified themselves as unemployed former Iraqi army officers). Under the old regime, many Sunnis from "good families" joined the military or Baath party to cement their family or tribe's position of prominence. The Coalition needs to reach out to such Sunnis, provide them with dignified employment, and bring them into the new system. In addition, Abu Khumrah said, economic activity in Sunni areas has not yet started to pick up, and government services -- including electricity, water, and sewerage -- are sporadic, when available at all. The Coalition needs to work to remedy these issues as quickly as possible, the group argued, to show Sunnis that they have gained something from the departure of Saddam. "Thus far, nothing you promised us has come to pass," accused Sheikh Abdullah al-Jabouri from Kirkuk. "Painting schools is not enough."

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A PITCH FOR THE MEK?
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17. (C) Midway in the conversation, Abu Khumrah made a pitch for lenient treatment for the members and family of the Mujaheddin-e-Khalk (MEK), the Iranian opposition/terrorist group that had large numbers of supporters and militants based in Iraq under Saddam. Abu Khumrah said that the goals of the MEK closely track those of the USG in Iran, and that the U.S. should work to convince the ICG not to expel them from Iraq or, alternatively, to accept them into the U.S. Abu Khumrah backed off a bit after PolCouns explained the terrorist history of the MEK and its legal designation by the U.S. as a foreign terrorist organization.

COMMENT

18. (C) We cannot vouch for the bone fides or motivations of this group or the Iraqi Peace Party. We note, however, that this group's complaints and suggestions were remarkably similar to ref conversation between OPO Director Schlicher and the head of the Council of Sunni Communities in Iraq (ref). The members of this group appeared to us to be sincere in their desire to work with the U.S., but also want to be reassured that the Coalition will act on at least some of their recommendations.

19. (U) CPA Baghdad minimize considered.

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